

SKY CONVERSATIONS

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The Writing Zone / Writing and Society Research Centre

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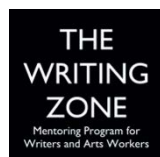
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Viniana Rokobili’s poem “May She Know” appeared first in the online “Poetry Listening Lounge” for the 2020 Research Creation Day showcase in the School of Humanities, WSU:

<http://student.hca.westernsydney.edu.au/sites/researchcreationshowcase/poetry.html>

An earlier version of Martin Reyes’ essay “Cul De Sac” was short-listed for the 2020 “Young Creatives Awards” and appears online here: <https://www.innerwest.nsw.gov.au/explore/whats-on/events-in-detail/young-creative-awards>

Sections of Ryan Bautista’s essay “4ever and ever” were published as part of an essay titled “Call me when the Beatles have contributed to music half as much as the Veronicas” which appears in Issue 115 (“Goth”) of *Voiceworks* literary journal published by Express Media.

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SKY CONVERSATIONS

This chapbook was put together entirely through sky conversations. That is to say, it was written and edited over the Internet, through Zoom workshops, phone calls and emails, without its writers and collaborators ever having met. It seems unremarkable when laid out like that, considering how many anthologies are created this way in normal circumstances. And for some reason, managing to function in a year like 2020 no longer seems like an extraordinary feat. But it feels important to resist a kind of capital-driven apathy in which obstacles are surmounted by pretending they don't exist. The authors of this book have only ever seen each other's faces confined within a box on a computer or phone screen, exclusively interacting via electronic soundwaves swirling through the sky.

Sky Conversations is the first publication by The Writing Zone, a three-year program designed to support young writers from Sydney's Western suburbs to tell their stories, polish their craft and build creative community. Directed by the Writing and Society Research Centre at the University of Western Sydney, The Writing Zone generates publication, editing, employment and performance opportunities for emerging writers under thirty. This collection gathers together short stories, poems, essays, excerpts from novels, and a screenplay by the first twelve Western Sydney writers to be selected for The Writing Zone. For many of them, this book is their first foray into public space as an author. Some have never had their work published.

We did not confine the writers to specific topics. They were not limited to writing within the boundaries of Western Sydney. Nor did we ask for stories reducing them to narrow mandates that might devalue their myriad identities and multifaceted interests. So these writings vary in subject and intensity, reflecting the spirited minds of our writers. Reading through and editing these submissions, I found myself continuously amazed by the authors' capacity to imagine new worlds and create fully fleshed characters, and to examine the complexities and polarities of life on earth. I was inspired by the ways they wrote of and researched their own cultures and histories without betraying their people and principles for a certain gaze. They bared their souls and examined their lives with vulnerability, while interrogating the structural and societal limitations they grapple with.

Thank you to the young writers who have given generously to The Writing Zone, for putting forward your early works in this publication, and for sharing your talents with the world: Viniana Rokobili, Sophiya Sharma, Huyen Hac Helen Tran, Yasir Elgamil, Christine Lai, Nadia Hirst, Kim Pham, Martyn Reyes, Duy Quang Mai, Yasmin Ali, Ryan Bautista and Tina Nyfakos. Thank you to The Writing Zone

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We are grateful to poet Duy Quang Mai for granting permission to use one of his stellar poem titles, “Sky Conversations”, as a touchstone for this book. In this collection, he writes: “Our hands kept flailing / on the balcony in the winter-soft air because we wanted to know // what was it like to be saved by ourselves”. Ours has been a winter of sky conversations from remotely connected rooms and balconies—a virtual music of community through writing, and a way of saving ourselves by attending to the words and voices of others.

Ilhan Abdi

Program Officer, The Writing Zone, 2020

May She Know

Viniana Rokobili

I am heard, with my father's voice
I fight with hands from my Bu
The same tilted middle finger
I am seen, with my mother's detailing
I walk this life with the legs of her Ratu,
I am the shape of the land of Suvavou
I am the name of the Nakelo people
I am part of the life of the Lomai Viti Province

I am able to create
The way of life
So that she is able to hear the voice of my Nau
So she is able to see her Bu in the mirror
So she can see the lines that cried for her
She will be the flower from heaven sent to stop the tears
She will blossom,
Noqu luvequ will carry on the love
She will run through this life
If I do not reach there she will

May she know where her voice came from
May she know her name, the land of her Yaca
May she turn through the life of the unturned, truth of her ancestors
May she have her own voice to carry, and there is where her Tai will be
May she look through the reflection of her Bu flowing down her cheek

I am, She will, May She

With Love, The Streets

Viniana Rokobili

There in front of her big brown eyes, from her mother

Her mind, once innocent, sees a brother.

There she stood with her small, sweaty palms, her hand resting against the glass of systems, the glass of reflection, the glass of separation.

There she stood.

There in front of him, no longer the small girl he once remembered, whose hand he held to cross the streets that sucked him in, like an unplugged sink, water whirling down the drain. Disconnected from the outside world he had roamed some six years ago.

Bound in robes that made his overworked mother—always brimming with words—silent, eyes watery, staring at him.

Behind the glass he stared back.

She never understood the words or she didn't want to understand.

The holy songs would play, and there would be the question, why me?

There she would sit dismantled, with smoke in the air, thinking of the reflection she tried to forget.

There in the walls, cold and alone, he looks through the small window with the salty, crisp, cold air up against his hardened, unshaven face. There are the intertwined distant sounds of the water that remind him of his island. He hears the distorted sounds of the cars on the street that he once followed, whose darkened hand he once held, only to be pushed and strangled by its cruel heart, blackened by the tar over the years.

There

From *A Boy For All Seasons*

Sophiya Sharma

Abu told us that the old man had walked all the way from Malerkotla, a journey of two days and one night. He was relieved he hadn't been robbed at one of the rest stops. We were happy because not only did he bring all the medicine required to treat Ammi, but also the *qeemti tawiz* amulets Shahnawaz would wear when he was born, to protect him from the evil eye. In those days, Ammi was fond of repeatedly pointing out that not a single leaf had stirred on the neem tree all evening, or in fact all week. Ammi made *sherbet* with the ice that Aisha and I had bought in rectangular blocks as we looked on through the mud brick alcove.

"Ammi, will you save us some ice?" Aisha inquired. Ammi gave us both a sideways glance and shrugged.

"It would be a better use of the ice if we cooled the mangoes with it. We have to be sensible in these matters." She gave us a faint smile.

So we drowned a dozen mangoes in a bucket of water and dropped in the leftover ice, all the while touching the smooth, cool blocks and giggling as we held up our chilled fingers and touched them to each other's cheeks.



Ammi was heavily pregnant and sick again. Her feet splayed like giant paws as she walked, and her face was swollen red every morning. The bump was barely visible in her vestibular *abaya*, though the curve in her back made it look as though someone was prodding a stick into her spine to keep her moving forward when she walked. The baby growing inside Ammi was a boy, and Abu had told Aisha and I that the evil spirit in our house did not want Ammi to give birth to him. So Faruq Miyan had been called especially from Malerkotla to scare the evil spirit away.

Some days Ammi would not leave her bed at all. She would weep quietly while lying on her back, her belly rising up in the air like a mound. Her cheeks would be aflame as she blew puffs of agitated breath into the air. On such days, Abu would make us tea and comb Aisha's hair, while I would fan Ammi, my other hand riding the rhythms of her big bump.



Faruq Miyan was an old man, his skin like shrunken tan leather and his beard a candy orange from being dyed with henna. His small cap resembled the doilies underneath the fancy teacups at Aunt Suleima's house. His metal trunk was held together with rope rather than hinges and locks. He ate the goat curry Ammi had made with gusto, sucking away at the marrow after he was done with the meat. Later he helped himself to two fat mangoes from the ice bucket. That night Aisha and I stared at each other from our respective *charpays* as the others slept, wondering what the coming days would bring.

The old man got to work in the early hours before sunrise the next day. He coughed, spat, and gargled with warm water. After that he set a *beedi* alight between his lips and pulled out a hammer and four nails from his trunk. Aisha and I watched from a distance as he hammered a nail to the top of each doorframe and window on all four sides of the house. He chanted something under his breath as he did this, followed by a shrill *Allah Hu Akbar* when he was done.

"This will stop the evil spirit from escaping, my daughters," he smiled, his voice trembling as though it was something left to balance on an uneven surface.

He opened up his trunk, which had a haphazard collection of items stuffed inside. There was a thick wand made of peacock feathers, a glass bottle, a small pile of clothes, one bottle of kerosene, another small bottle with a yellow liquid inside, a knife, coils of rope, and a small wooden box with the words *Afzal Shah Qeemti Tawiz*—Afzal Shah's Precious Amulets—carved into it. Faruq Miyan returned the hammer to the trunk before sliding it back under the *charpoy* on which he slept.

Aisha and I returned home from school that day and found Faruq Miyan sitting by a small fire in the courtyard, digging leftover pieces of tin roof into the earth to guard the flames from the unstirring air.

"Go and ask him what he is doing, the madman," Aisha said, nudging my shoulder. I shook my head, took a bamboo stool, and sat at a distance from the old man.

Faruq Miyan requested a cup of chai, which I made. We both watched on as he took his first sip. After giving a nod of approval, he let out a big sigh.

"My daughters... I will share a secret with both of you because I think you will understand."

Aisha sat up and fumbled with her *dupatta* before covering her head with it. We both leaned in to listen.

“Some evil entity has taken hold of your mother. There is no doubt about that. The job of a good *hakim* is to find the source and destroy its power. But what is this evil that we are out to destroy?” Faruq Miyan paused and stared at his feet, his toothless jaw wide open.

“It is a *shaitaan* of the mind. What ails your mother is not something out there, but something in here.” Faruq Miyan tapped his temple with two fingers.

“A good *hakim* can trick the mind. He makes a fire, he plants nails into wood, and he boils all kinds of potions. He is a good magician because he dispenses the medicine right before your eyes but doesn’t let you in on the trick.”

Faruq Miyan sipped his cooling chai. The weather had turned, with a slow breeze blowing in dark clouds from the west. The fire burned steadily and Faruq Miyan would reach for some twigs every now and then to sustain it.

“Shahana, you are a smart girl. Tell me what disease of the mind ails your mother?” Faruq Miyan looked up at me expectantly. I was startled to hear my name, and said the first thing that came to my mind. “Fear.”

Faruq Miyan nodded.

“The fear of my father. Of Aunt Suleima. Of everyone.” I spoke slowly.

Faruq Miyan inched closer to me and cupped his hand behind his ear, waiting for me to say more.

“Fear that she won’t give birth to a baby boy after all.”

From *Fish Gliding in Water*

Huyen Hac Helen Tran

I am sitting on the front porch with my father. He on an old computer chair, and I on a small red plastic stool. I am wondering how he would react if I were to reach over and—as if it were so natural to me—take a cigarette from his packet. I wonder what noise would leave his lips if I lit it up like a fish gliding in water, flicking off the newly formed ash into the air, missing the tray, as a stable pillar of burning white quietly formed on his own cigarette.

I imagine a bellowing *oi!* I imagine he might smack it out of my hand. He might say something like *you are a girl you cannot do that* and I would feel indignant for a moment, but really, that's scraping the barrel. He might become inflamed with fear, shot through with a panic that I had done this before and, with one finger pointed, jabbing towards the sky at nothing in particular, launch into a speech about how his addiction to cigarettes verging on near 50 years is the reason his heart is so weak, the reason he finds himself retired at 65 years old, a year earlier than expected. Unable to sleep at night except in short bursts permeated by dreams of rabid dogs and men with guns, an aftermath of the war he tells me, though he's told me countless times before of the way it wriggles its way down behind his gut. A pain, searing, a hidden moving abrasion. This, the thing, the result of a 50-year calamity.

All of this seems so miniscule when I think of the rest of his life, and so I filter through his memories to see if I can sink in deeper. I replay scenes from fuzzy video tapes, his eyes my own, my eyes his. The memories flicker like golden flakes in the water, tiny valleys of shadows bending as they sink. He takes another puff, continues lecturing me, and I am watching him

years before I existed, drunk as hell, unzipping his pants and taking a piss on a restaurant table, his sons laughing and laughing and laughing

and then I am looking down at myself, passed out in an uber, vomit strewn all over my shirt

and here he is knocking on the front door in the same clothes he disappeared in three days ago, the stench wet on his skin, his wife screaming anh... anh between—

locked doors and he is asleep in the living room. He doesn't know this, but all I can hear while I drag is the in and out of his snore.

Yet he only speaks of what the cigarettes have done. The cigarettes. What they would do to my body. I, never one to argue back, preferring to simmer underneath (perhaps an even worse trait), would nod, snuff it out and smile.

But I am thinking there is more to his body than this. It has been a long life. I realise I could never hate the cigarettes. If he hadn't this habit, this happenstance, maybe we would never sit out here watching cars go by in the evenings. I picture myself—a few hours, or years, in the future—turning off the porch light, and it is all a golden flake in the distance, but there is persistence to it. The smoke is there, the smell is there. And there is this thing about smoke. This thing where it appears, floats, clings, and in light, lingers and dances. Then it dissipates and each time, it slinks around the edges of my pea-shaped nostrils, and as it slinks I do not crinkle my nose. Instead I breathe it in deeply.

Another valley forms and I sink. I am still on the porch with my father. But what I see instead is the local Vietnamese newspaper, his forehead and spiky black hair just peeping out above. Symbols form together to create words I cannot say or even begin to understand, but I know they are mine to weigh on my tongue, as easily as they roll off his. I sift through paragraphs, sounding out the letters in my head with the Roman phonetic I learned all my life, knowing there is more to it, and in my own home too, but never quite knowing how to reach it.

I am young, how young I do not know, because that was *then* and *then* spans years before the present and his hair has sharpened to a buzzcut, the white roots almost an optical illusion hiding amidst the black tips, and the newspaper is now a smartphone playing a news channel with Vietnamese dub. First the English—low, grumbly and commercial—then a few seconds later, the boom of the translator. It sounds like a crackling firepit, a constant pop and fizzle of static. Always a bit jarring to my unaccustomed ears, as if they had recorded the translation while on a busy street and were sat too close to the microphone.

I remain still. Wrinkles morph into his face. His hair colour and the ratio of black and white continue to transpose themselves. Other things shapeshift. The chair, the table (though it's always covered in dirt and ash), the glasses he wears, the colour of his moustache, the time of day, the packaging of the cigarettes (on pay days, Winfield Optimum Blues; on other days, imports)... but never the inhale. The unchanging, almost meditative way his hands—almost medicinal in their movements—go from packet to fingertips to lips, to resting atop his knee within those two minutes.

So again, I do not hate the cigarettes. Rather, I get into the car, smell it in the seats, sway between the tenses, think of him. And I will have this forever. He will always be in the car. He will always be on the front porch. I will always be watching the smoke around the light. I try to feel guilty for this but I do not.

There is a recurring joke in my family that he and I are one and the same, that I am more him than anyone in the world could ever be, beating out my two sisters, my three brothers, and all the uncles and aunts. He the eldest of the family and I the youngest. It's in the way we both laugh and hope that everyone is watching. The way it is poise, and then suddenly a sloppy rage. The way we straighten our backs when entering a room of strangers. Unbridled proof that I am my father's daughter showing itself again and again.

When he goes, I will remain solid, intangible, resin. Though perhaps murky and straining to the eye I will always be speckled through with his most golden fragments. Their crumpled centre always mine. Always his. His wife and his other children will know this.

He finishes his cigarette. I focus on the final inhale, still watching a reality just left of this one, the two of us having a smoke together, though I know this will never happen. He tells me he misses going out to see his friends at the pokies and having a beer. He asks me if I miss it too. I tell him I do. We both laugh, watch the sky inch into darkness. A car goes by. In the glow, I see the fragments flicker on our skin. I see the fishes swim. He says, *let's have a drink*. So I run to the kitchen, get the cognac and the wine and the plastic cups.

the world is way too loud for you and me

Christine Lai

Somewhere it's 2pm on a Thursday and she is lying in your bed. There is a tangled mass of limbs and soft murmurs are made against the crisp linen sheets. Whispers of half-made plans are collected and suspended in the dark, cementing a language that is sea-blue and rich with an architectural love.

Remnants of her are strewn across the room. The sweater that has been tossed back and forth between the two of you so many times it is difficult to remember who it belongs to. The band tee shirts you've owned for what feels like forever. The sheet music piled up on your bedroom floor.

She talks about vintage cars and doodles maps on your arm for you to get lost in. There are promises of driving around all night, stopping at cheap gas stations just to jump out of the car and dance to Miles Davis and take pictures under neon signs. She tastes like the rain before the thunder. Her eyes light up when she drags you to an unknown book store and flips through the pages, looking for a message bound to be just for the two of you. She reminds you what it's like to be carefree and roam to your childlike heart's content. She saves knee high socks for special occasions like sliding on the wooden floor. She picks flower petals off the ground and names them after Surrealist artists.

Somewhere it's 2pm on a Thursday and you're lying with your lover, but right now it's me on a Friday at midnight having dinner in an empty diner, debating myself on the existence of alternate universes. Feeling nostalgic for a place I've never known, while eavesdropping on the couple behind me who are celebrating their twenty-seventh anniversary.

Waiting for the comfortable disarray.

*the things you love are not random,
they are your calling*

Christine Lai

there is a hidden beauty in the world that we have to find through dysfunction.
where the tether you have to the rest of the universe
lies in shared smiles and knowing glances
within our proclivity for contradictions and defence mechanisms
in sarcastic remarks and the wit that drips from your best friend's mouth
in dry observations and matter-of-fact statements
and holding back our laughter before it washes over us,
a comfortable feeling
in the white lies we tell ourselves and the truths that are unfolded before us
and the double entendres and conversations held over the phone on a late night
which mark the cornerstone of a friendship

when some are buried under their blankets
and others are borrowing their mother's heels and waltzing into clubs
like they've done it a thousand times before
head high as they enter,
barely registering the mass of bodies swaying and the bass swallowing their heartbeats

it's the strangest flash of familiarity,
the sense of déjà vu
replaying through moments where
a swirling maelstrom of emotions envelops you whole
it is a pleasant undoing

euphoria and fear.
love and lust.
dazed and sane.

the dichotomous mix
a tug of war with a tangible and persistent pull,
things are messy here and contradictions can both be true
and, in this pocket universe,

our conversations are typed up on lined A4 paper—
the dialogue stretching the space between us
even when there is nothing to say
even when we are most comfortable silent
we find things to fill up the space anyway.

From Dawn

Yasir Elgamil

The early golden rays of sunlight crept through the open apartment window onto the rotating vinyl, where sand always seemed to settle. Although its speakers were worn with age, the sweet symphony of violins and light patter of bongos eased into the dark ambience of the room.

Hanging precariously above the vinyl on a nail bronzed by rust was a calendar. The rushed red pen marking stopped at *11 March 2031*. It was sometime in June now, or was it July...? It didn't matter.

The days were always the same.

A man's warm voice now joined the swelling music, the Arabic dancing off his tongue with linguistic grace.

"The birds don't care for maps and borders, don't need passports..."

"We travel to new places, build our nests with our songs..."

It was an old song, a relic from the 80s by Mustafa Sid Ahmed.

"He is one of the greatest classical Sudanese artists in our country's history!" my mother used to say every cleaning day, as she reached over to the spindle to replay the song for the fifth time.

A few rolls of bread, sardine tins and a pale assortment of vegetables were sprawled on the kitchen counter, the portions we could afford this week from the market man. I could still hear his nasal voice as it echoed in the distance through his sputtering microphone, almost melodic as he broadcast the foods cargoed in his mud splattered truck.

"Spring will be our neighbour and the crops will fill our homes..."

My nose curled. The scent of the room was slightly off.

Tick, tick, whoosh... the stove ignited. I held the syrupy bark of the *bakhoor* over the flame, its honeyed aroma dancing into my nostrils.

With the music chiming in the background, incense smoking in one hand, I unlocked and swiped through my phone with the other.

Ravaged villages of fire and ash. Bloodied corpses and dark figures bounding. Booming bombs and clacking guns joining the orchestra of misery. Although confined to a small screen, death leapt out and enveloped the room. Enveloped me. Its chilling fingers strangling my breath, stabbing at my stomach...

I felt a burning prickling. The cindering remnants of the *bakhoor* blackened my fingertips. The melancholy grey of the nimbus clouds strangled the sunlight outside, darkening the sky, rumbling.

"A feminine beauty sings to us and we lose sense of any worries and danger in our hearts..."

"Where would danger meet us? Where would danger meet us if we are like the birds..."

My eyes shot to Amal in the corner. My sister was oblivious in her own reality, playing with variegated toys, humming along to the song.

Looking back at the screen, the text beneath this grotesque amalgam read: "The genocide of the *Al Karama* tribe continues as the masked mercenaries on camelback continue their onslaught on their villages. Thousands of *Al Karama* people have now been killed and displaced. The current sitting Prime Minister, Hassan Elfaki, has been accused of hiring and sending these mercenaries to commit acts of war on the people of East Sudan during his 37-year term. He denies all responsibility, and rather claims divine punishment by God as the reason for the massacres..."

The rain pattered down hard in a reverberating drone.

Sweat clashed with the bitter tears that trickled down my face and leapt onto the bright screen, where comments now streamed past. A divergent hive mind of empty prayers and vapid demonstrations of performative activism, all overwhelmed by the frothing bile of racist tribalism.

I threw my phone at the mirror. It fractured into a widening spider web as my phone crashed against it, my shoulder aching from the violent force with which I had flung the device. My reddened fingers ran through my thick curls, threatening to pull them all out.

"Tomorrow my beauty, our children of ebony skin will be the joy that wash away the sadness of our past..."

The noise of shattering pottery rang below the apartment accompanied by a piercing scream. Deathly cold once again tremored down my spine, hands shaking, eyes searching the room.

Amal was not there. Just the remnants of strewn toys. A parched wail joined the cacophony, my sapped figure manically staring back at me, mouth agape through glassy remnants of the mirror, the only indication I was the source of this pained noise.

I didn't care.

I flew down the dark flight of stairs, staggering onto the street to find Amal sprawled next to glittering terracotta fragments. In the distance, the silhouette of a feline disappeared elegantly over the '*Shareh Al Dem*' street sign, sunrise sitting on its edge.

"I'm sorry Razaz," she sniffed, "I was trying give the ca—"

"Don't cry *habibti*," I interrupted as I embraced her warm body, my breathing immediately easing. "Do you want to walk to our favourite spot near the sunflower garden?" She nodded tentatively, staring up at me with glimmering eyes, her soft small hands grasping mine as I lifted her up, dusting the sand from her pale blue clothes.

Our street was mainly quiet and still at dawn, except for the occasional crowing rooster and daily *azhan* of the mosque. We could hear the light chatter of elders as they sat outside their homes and shared cups of *shai*, each of us nodding in acknowledgement of one another as we breezed past. The occasional mud puddle diverted our path slightly, and I had to pull Amal away from her impulsive playful urge to jump in.

Any semblance of a calm morning was soon forgotten as we wrapped around the corner into the roaring racket and flashing lights of the main street of *Shareh Al Nile*. A wide straight road of markets, people and

pollution, the synthetic filth becoming one with the earth, feeding toxicity to the paling palm trees, sloshing into the Nile river that flowed alongside parallel into the distance.

Past all of this lay our forsaken 'favourite place', a garden of Eden compared to the ugliness guarding its entry.

My nostrils flared. I inhaled deeply, my grip on Amal tightening as we joined the swarm. My arms guarded my sister's head from the splaying sprawl of limbs and bodies that pushed us around, the stench and heat of warm bodies making it almost impossible to breathe.

An explosion of cheers and whistles filled the air, followed by a surging shove of the rolling crowd that pushed us towards the source. A colossal glass pane stretched across a new construction, towering over the surrounding dilapidated buildings. Its milky translucence glowed on the astonished faces surrounding it. Contorted figures seemed to swim past the turbid background, their movements almost alien.

With a resounding hum and blinding flash, the dark shadows bent to form bold stark words... *Harakaat*.

They quickly disappeared and the glass cleared, revealing the shadows to be several men and women, now posing elegantly above the masses, their bodies adorned in a hypnotic amalgam of generic African clothing in shimmering colours. A feeling of uneasiness clawed at me the longer I stared at them.

Something was not right.

The chilling nature of my discovery then became clear. Although at first glance they appeared to look like me, with their deep brown skin, curly hair, full lips and garments, they were not my people.

A loud collective gasp and ovation filled the air tenfold, the excited shoving rocking us back and forth.

Did they not see what I saw?

A robotic feminine voice drowned the crowd's noise. "Welcome! Our new store is now open to the public sphere. Enjoy our new unique collection of carefully crafted garments, accessories and other merchandise! *Harakaat*, the way of the future!"

The crowd continued their commendation.

Did they simply not care?

Holding Amal closer, I glanced down to find her absorbed in her childish microcosm as she kicked around the sand at her feet, unphased by the deafening roar and terrifying scene before us.

I envied her blissful ignorance and despised that of the mob around me, pressing against the store glass, wanting and needing this façade of luxury. Impossible prices shattered any hope of attaining them, a stark reminder of the corporate puppeteers leeching from my country.

How wonderful must that ignorance be, to be able to watch this frightening modern minstrel show by these imposters, teeming with gaudy appropriation. The descendants of those who colonised and enslaved us, masquerading as the architects and owners of our creations.

Our tradition. Our inheritance.

The Ghosts of Girls' Bodies

Nadia Hirst

CONTENT WARNING: This piece contains content relating to sexual assault, which may be distressing to some readers.

00:00

There is the simple fact that ballet did not stick and gymnastics was an acceptable alternative. There is my mother's sacrifice on a long drive to the Minchinbury centre where a botched handstand crumples my body like a discarded newspaper on a Sydney train. There is the elation at manoeuvring into the correct curvature on the uneven bars and landing dauntlessly on plush foam cubes. Waiting for class to begin and nimbly driving a leg forward into the splits, my body intuitively adjusts and straightens, mind focused squarely on how it was mine to move.

[36:31](#)

There is the resounding and unquestioning belief when I sit on my mother's knee and make my admission, our faces brought together by the gentle motion of being bounced on her lap. There is the mother's bellyful of *sick* that will instigate a flurry of recorded interviews as evidence mounted against *that monster* as if the erasure of agency is not performed at each level of authority against survivors. There is the question of court, answered with a shake of my head. It would be a small administrative blip in the recording room full of tapes that held my secrets hostage.

[19:01](#)

Watching rapt along with the rest of the world, I cheered as Simone Biles became the first female gymnast to land a triple-double combination on floor in competition and a double-double dismount off the beam at the 2019 U.S Gymnastics Championship. Her movements are only ever precise and resolute, feet planting on the ten-centimetre beam with a satisfying *thwack* that pulsates upwards through my own body in a distant echo of a former memory. The sheer audacity of her athleticism has been the subject of countless videos, in which the exact movements of her '[gravity-defying](#)' body are dissected and depicted in order to comprehend their worth in gold medals. Young girls' bodies, particularly those of dark-skinned Black women and girls such as Biles, are subjected to a blinding national gaze from as young as

five years old. It was no surprise to me when she competed and managed the historic win, despite having disclosed that she was sexually abused by her sports physician, Larry Nassar, only eighteen months earlier. The elation that comes from reclaiming what is irrefutably ours was reflected back at me in Biles' signature smile when she stuck her beam dismount.

[13:08](#)

In her exposé on Larry Nassar's grooming techniques for *The Cut*, journalist Mary Pilon reviewed the [‘digital ghosts’](#) that remained as a result of a very different set of gymnastics videos. Under the guise of trusted medical expert, Nassar constructed a narrative of credibility by posting footage of his physical therapy ‘techniques’ for young gymnasts. They remained accessible on YouTube even after the wave of complaints from sexual abuse survivors. The bodies responsible for protecting the women, namely USA Gymnastics and the United States Olympic Committee, were permitted to exploit young gymnasts' bodies as cornucopias for imagined national glory and it is, again, no surprise to me that they were slow to prevent victimisation online by allowing the videos to remain visible. Only after renewed public attention in the wake of the Nassar hearing did YouTube finally make the decision to have the videos removed.

[11:45](#)

In her 2017 film *You Were Never Really Here*, Scottish director Lynne Ramsay refuses to depict the assaults raged against young girls, effectively ensuring they maintain agency over their own bodies. Instead, she always cuts to the next scene. In the protagonist Nina's silence after surviving her assault, we read her defiance against the crime that has been thrust upon her and a resolute claiming of her innocence. Perhaps just as strikingly, there is the rearrangement of the gaze thrust upon women's bodies during assault in Australian director Jennifer Kent's *The Nightingale*. At the onset of violence, she forces viewers to watch the women's faces contort as each scene continues to its brutal conclusion, rather than cutting away, in a scathing critique of our tendency to gloss over rape as a footnote in a larger plot.

[10:29](#)

Reclaiming control of my body is a challenge that I have grappled with for my entire life. I take great issue with the narrative of victimhood automatically allotted to my story, because it reduces my body to a mere cavity filled with the violence of another. This body will not be narrated. It has overcome an early

obsession with physical validation, the guilt associated with any kind of sexual activity, the shame of gaining weight as a ploy to escape the leering eyes of men. It is only with hindsight that I have been able to recognise that these behaviours were the result of my sexual assaults. I never felt like a victim, and it was not until I heard the voices of other assault survivors that I realised I had experienced something unspeakably familiar.

[10:12](#)

Time and time again, it seems that reclaiming deeply personal stories can be a radical act of healing that counters the fixed truths we have become accustomed to in our histories and cultures. The Karrabing Film Collective, a group of Indigenous filmmakers from the north-western region of Australia, formed in the wake of the violence of the NT Intervention, understand film as a way to [actively intervene in the anthropological narratives](#) reinforced by others. Their most recent documentary *Day in the Life* fuses multi-perspective filmed footage with other medias to creatively refocus attention on the everyday experiences of Indigenous people. Essentially, individuals are given the opportunity to imaginatively reconstruct their realities.

[8:13](#)

“Years. Years of work.”

Those were the words that stuck with me after I watched one video of a woman detailing her experience of assault. I identified less with the assault, and more with the behaviours she adopted afterwards to regain control over her own life. Here lies the *work* I have only begun to put in, to understand what I went through after being sexually assaulted as a child.

The permission I give myself to take up space, and the feeling of absolute control over a set of handlebars that send me whizzing through the familiar streets of my neighbourhood, have ultimately vaulted my vulnerabilities into newfound strengths. There is the moment of being airborne on my bicycle after cresting a conspicuous pothole, only to intuitively extend my legs and begin peddling furiously to avoid the momentary jolt of pain. There is the crunching of asphalt under wheels as I tear down hills with sheer abandon, legs no longer needing to find purchase on the pedals because they are whizzing faster than my shifting thoughts. Feeling confident in the pleasurable act of moving freely was once relegated to my childhood, but it is in the welcome autonomy of bike riding that my body becomes my own again.

Excerpt from *Bird Hands Beaver A Fishmint Bouquet*

Kim Pham

SYNOPSIS:

13-year-old Bridget Bui is determined to ace the national KRAPLAN tests and become the golden child she was destined to be. But her plans fall apart when her archnemesis cousin, Amy, moves in from Vietnam. Amy quickly becomes everything Bridget is not: smart, sporty and popular. With her life at home and school both under threat, Bridget is willing to do whatever it takes to survive. *Bird Hands Beaver a Fishmint Bouquet* is a comical coming-of-age drama with an unsettling twist.

EXT. SCHOOL OVAL—MIDDAY

The sun hammers down on the students as they jog around the oval. BRIDGET spots DESIREE (13) playing netball. DESIREE scores and the whole team cheers. The sports teacher hands DESIREE a sheet of paper and she shoves it in her bag.

BRIDGET

What's that?

DESIREE

Just a competition notification.

BRIDGET

Another one? Our school's netball team is the worst. Not your fault obviously.

BRIDGET rubs her butt.

DESIREE

Your mum?

BRIDGET

No, a magpie swooped at me.

DESIREE

Seriously, what'd you do this time?

BRIDGET

No, really, I was—

A group of students overtake BRIDGET.

PHILIP

Nice clothes ya povo freak! Did you get those at Salvos?

PHILIP (13) and his entourage sprint off.

INT. FOOD TECH ROOM—LATER

MRS MOSMAN (50s) hovers around a maze of kitchenettes. Students are busy slicing, dicing and dishing up.

BRIDGET is colouring in the white paint on her shoes with a black marker.

BRIDGET

My mum promised she'd take me to get new sports clothes tomorrow.

DESIREE

Try not to let them get to you Bree.

DESIREE rolls up her bread slices with cream filling.

BRIDGET

Those kids from 9B are such freakin' trolls! Why can't they just completely ignore us like 9A?

DESIREE

Crap!

Cream oozes out of DESIREE'S bread sticks. She quickly throws the ones she can save onto a bed of pistachio kernels.

BRIDGET

I hate that we have to share food tech with them.

DESIREE

Trust me, I think they hate it more.

BRIDGET'S side of the class is chaotic: a girl hovers a strand of hair over the stove and watches it burn and fizzle, a boy pretends to cut himself and his friends take photos of his tomato passata covered hands and another girl throws a dead cockroach into her cake batter.

MEANWHILE...

On the other side of the class, EMILY (13) expertly sautés garlic and asparagus. MRS MOSMAN watches her with satisfaction. EMILY assembles her dish and plants an Italian flag toothpick on the pasta's peak.

EMILY

Creamy garlic truffle and asparagus fettuccine.

MRS MOSMAN has a taste. Her eyes roll back.

MRS MOSMAN

Impeccable flavours and presentation.

MRS MOSMAN is about to mark something on her clipboard when she suddenly pauses.

MRS MOSMAN (CONT'D)

Except, this assessment asked that you add your own twist to a beloved dish from your cultural heritage. I think a deduction of marks is in order to keep it fair for everyone. Wouldn't you agree, Miss Zhang?

BRIDGET overhears and starts cackling silently. DESIREE nudges her on the head and points to her empty bench.

EMILY

Actually Mrs. Mosman, I lived in Italy when I was younger and this was one of my favourite foods while I was there.

BRIDGET'S jaw drops.

MRS MOSMAN

Oh my, I didn't know. My apologies.

BRIDGET pulls her hair, and mouths "What?!"

DESIREE

Plot twist.

BRIDGET grabs DESIREE'S collar.

BRIDGET

She was on holiday in Italy when corona hit! She was stranded and now she's over there acting like she's Jamie Oliver.

DESIREE grabs BRIDGET'S collar back.

DESIREE

Simmer down.

MRS MOSMAN makes her way to their end of the room. BRIDGET tears a paper corner from her textbook and scribbles something on it.

MRS MOSMAN

Looks lovely Desiree.

BRIDGET sneaks to the front and pulls out her lunch box from her bag.

MRS MOSMAN sniffs it and takes a bite.

BRIDGET slides back behind the bench and shakes out a block of rice noodles onto a plate. She throws it in the microwave.

One minute.

MRS MOSMAN

(chewing) What's this called?

DESIREE

Ladies Arms.

MRS MOSMAN chokes.

MRS MOSMAN

What?

DESIREE

It was my grandma's but I gave it a little twist.

MRS MOSMAN is slightly horrified.

BRIDGET'S up next.

The microwave is counting down loudly: 5, 4, 3—

MRS MOSMAN tilts her head to get a better look at BRIDGET'S kitchenette; BRIDGET mirrors her, smiling.

BEEP, BEEP, BEEP.

BRIDGET grabs the plate but burns herself. She pinches her earlobes to remedy it. She places a small piece of paper on the bed of bean sprouts.

MRS MOSMAN takes a closer look.

The paper reads: VIETNAM.

A beat.

The ink slowly bleeds out into the fish sauce.

EXT. CANTEEN—LATER

BRIDGET and DESIREE are in a long queue for the canteen. Groups of rowdy students push in and out of the line.

BRIDGET and DESIREE are pushed further and further away from the front of the line.

BRIDGET

No one cares about food tech anyways. I got an E from Mrs Mosman last year and my mum didn't even flinch.

BRIDGET is eating her rice noodles.

DESIREE

That's because you told her E stands for excellent.

The canteen lady beats her meat tenderiser on the counter.

CANTEEN LADY

Order! Ordeeeeeer! I said ORDER ya dogs!

It works.

CANTEEN LADY (CONT'D)

Everyone in the lunch order line WHO ISN'T collecting a lunch order, please move to the other line! You will not be served if you are in the wrong line.

Dozens of people move from one line to the back of another. BRIDGET sees the boy again.

BRIDGET

Who's that?

DESIREE

Who?

BRIDGET

He's over at the bubblers with Philip and his trolls.

DESIREE

Oh! He's new. Don't know what his name is... but it's really weird.

BRIDGET

Is it like Gilbert or something?

DESIREE

No, that he's here. He transferred from some famous selective school in the city.

The boy breaks a long twig into shorter pieces.

BRIDGET

Weirdo...

He catches BRIDGET staring at him again. She looks away.

DESIREE

Bree... look.

DESIREE points at EMILY and her friends.

BRIDGET

What's she doing talking to lazy-eye Luke?

LUKE (13) lets them go in front of him.

BRIDGET (CONT'D)

Are you kidding me?! Can he even see how many people he's letting in?!

DESIREE

Must be nice...

BRIDGET

What?

DESIREE

... to be cool and smart.

BRIDGET squeezes DESIREE'S shoulders.

BRIDGET

Look at me. We are going to transfer into the selective class this year. So cheer up!

DESIREE breaks into a peal of laughter.

EXT. ENGLISH CLASS—LATER

MR DUFFY is sat on top of his desk while reading a picture book to the class: The Bronte Children of the Moors. He is too absorbed by his own voice to notice that the class is slowly lulled to sleep by it.

MR DUFFY

... Charlotte Bronte was the eldest of the three sisters and was arguably the most accomplished and beautiful, in my opinion...

DESIREE is muffling her laughter.

BRIDGET

Can you shut up?

DESIREE

What? You told me to cheer up.

MR DUFFY

... one of the most prolific Victorian women writers, best known for her novels including *Jane Eyre*, *Villette*...

BRIDGET

Fine, I'll transfer myself then. But when you've done nothing with your life and I'm the world's most famous plastic surgeon, don't come crying to me like, "Oh, I wish I had listened to Bridget when I had the chance to become cooler and smarter and—"

DESIREE

Even if we get full marks for everything we do this year—

MR DUFFY

... much of her life was marred by tragedy and sadly, she eventually died during childbirth.

BRIDGET

This year is different. I can feel it.

DESIREE

It doesn't matter how DIFFERENT it feels to you. We don't get marked the same Bree. While they're over there learning Shakespeare's *Ham Slice*, we're over here reading *Dr. Seuss for Dummies*!

DANNY (13) raises his hand.

DANNY

Sir, I don't get it. How'd she write all that stuff if she died when she was a baby?

INT. THE BUI FAMILY KITCHEN—AFTERNOON

HUYEN is on the phone while rubbing handfuls of salt on a fish in the sink.

HUYEN

... Of course, I'm sure they'll get along. She's the same age as my eldest...

Her daughter ANGELA, a pre-schooler, tugs at HUYEN'S shirt crying.

HUYEN

She's actually arriving in two—

BRIDGET (O.S.)

Mum, someone's calling you!

HUYEN

Sorry, just give me a minute.

HUYEN puts down her mobile and picks up the home phone.

HUYEN (CONT'D)

ALLO?

ANGELA pulls her mum's shirt over her head and rubs her face against her mum's waist.

HUYEN (CONT'D)

Yes, that's her.

A beat.

HUYEN (CONT'D)

I'm sorry for all the trouble. I... Would you perhaps know of
any other places I could send—

They hang up.

INT. LIVING ROOM—CONTINUOUS

BRIDGET pauses her game. It's quiet. She picks up the phone.

BEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEP.

She dials.

BRIDGET

Hey.

DESIREE (O.S.)

Hey.

BRIDGET

So the KRAPLAN is this year.

DESIREE (O.S.)

Yeah, so?

BRIDGET

And everyone gets the same tests. So, if our marks beat the
marks in 9A, then that's a sure sign that we belong up there.
See? Once we establish ourselves as academic exemplars, then
we can start making real changes to this dumb school. Change is
coming, I can feel it.

DESIREE

First off, how the hell are we going to beat them? And second,
it's impossible! Social mobility is only for selective students. We
can't compete! There are only five spots!

BRIDGET

That's five more than we've ever ha—

SMACK! BRIDGET drops the phone.

HUYEN
YOU'RE AS DUMB AS A COW!

HUYEN slaps BRIDGET across the face and head repeatedly.

HUYEN (CONT'D)
HOW STUPID CAN YOU BE THAT THEY WON'T EVEN
TAKE MY MONEY?! DID YOU NOT THINK THAT I'D FIND
OUT SOONER OR LATER?

BRIDGET falls on the floor. Her mum whips her with a feather duster.

HUYEN (CONT'D)
YOUR ANCESTORS ARE WATCHING YOU! HOW
COULD YOU EMBARRASS ME LIKE THIS?!

INT. KITCHEN—EVENING

Everyone is sat down having dinner. DUNG (40s) notices his daughter's sullen pout and red, puffy eyes. He gives BRIDGET his fish roe. She looks up, blinking away her tears.

DUNG
Are there any peanuts left?
HUYEN
We're out.

HUYEN peels off the skin on her fish and gives it to Bridget.

HUYEN (CONT'D)
If you keep crying your bowl of rice will become congee.
ANGELA
Mum. Dad. I want to be a vegetarian.

HUYEN

What's that?

BRIDGET

It means she doesn't want to eat meat anymore.

HUYEN

What? But you love Pho! What the hell are they teaching you in preschool?

ANGELA

No! A vegetarian! An animal doctor!

HUYEN glares at her husband.

HUYEN

Aren't you going to say something?

BRIDGET

She means veterinarian. It's a doctor for animals.

HUYEN

(gasps) That's even worse.

Cul De Sac

Martyn Reyes

*It snuck through the hidden corners of the edgeless pathway into my window
And invited itself into yours, two houses down
We shared a street name and the same dark ideation
It circled around and around and around your head as it did mine
But you couldn't escape the dead end*



It was the second funeral we had been to in six months. First, a distant relative and now a neighbour. Each death followed a pattern that woke my parents to the reality that any of their sons could tick the same boxes: young, Filipino, male, from Western Sydney.

My parents drove slowly through Leppington cemetery. Anxiously gripping her rosary beads, Mum threaded the holy string between her stiffened fingers. As we drew closer to the burial plot, she turned to me with her eyes slightly watering and blotched red. "You would never do this to me," she croaked, holding my gaze longer than I was comfortable with. It came across as a desperate plea rather than a simple comment. "You'd tell me if there was anything wrong, right?"

I tickled the roof of my tongue, a technique I learnt as a child to stop tears from forming.

"Of course not," I lied.

"You know you can talk to us about anything," they lied back.



Buying caps off a mate do you want any

4?

Wait no, 2

Wow

Your serotonin is going to be fucked

But getting 4 is probably the smarter

*i should probably decrease my intake It fucks with my
moods i'm starting on antidepressants and apparently
caps don't work with them
so i'm planning my last hoorah*

Damn. Antidepressants? Were you prescribed them?

*Nah i asked to try them out but still uncertain about
taking them
don't tell mum or dad*

I feel like antidepressants would be a last resort thing



“Does your family have a history of mental illness you’re aware—”

I answered the question before the psychologist had even finished asking, already knowing it wasn’t going to give them any insight into why I was feeling the way I was feeling.

“I don’t know. I think my mum was feeling depressed during her chemo? Dad said something in passing about anxiety.”

Without taking their eyes off their clipboard, they continued the interrogation.

“Your parents... what’s your relationship with them like?”

I didn’t know how to answer the question. They glanced up and saw the confusion on my face.

“I mean, are they supportive? Do you get along? Can you talk to them about these things?”

“I guess. Yeah... We get along. I see them often and they love me if that’s what you mean. But... nah... I wouldn’t say they know too much about this stuff. We don’t really talk about it.”



The beaten up 2004 Toyota Camry that we nicknamed Annie was more than just a car for my family. Its function extended as the only place we were able to talk about anything serious. A metal shell in motion; a mobile therapy room; an enclosed space opportune for uncomfortable conversations one could not escape. It was where my parents had the porn conversation with me and my brothers. Our only option was to sit in discomfort, waiting until we could run back into our rooms and lock the door, wishing the car would suffer a minor crash in order to delay the mortification. I must admit, it's an effective method of confrontation. Once we left the car, the matter never had to be addressed again.



I woke up one sweaty morning to an essay-length message from Mum in the family group chat. She informed us of a death in the family and spared no detail. Oliver, the son of my grandfather's cousin, was found hanging in the backyard shed in his family home by his mother.

My parents visited the body that night with other relatives. Filipinos aren't weird about seeing dead bodies. We love an open casket. Filipino mourners are always weeping by the coffin, touching and holding the body, crying onto the chest of the deceased. When I attended viewings as a child, Mum would encourage me to touch the cold, clammy corpse but she always met with my panicked hesitation. They scared me in a way that a lifeless body would scare any child. They were always unrecognisable; them but not them.

"We all had a look at him—looked like he was sleeping. No one knew he was depressed enough to do it," she concluded.

He was depressed *enough* to do it.

"I'm blessed with sons I knew had experienced some form of depression in your younger years but with the help of God, our prayers and others whom you reached out to, you became strong enough to pull through."

When I received that message, my body couldn't help but deteriorate into waves of despair. It's not that I was particularly close with Oliver. I felt like a fraud for reacting as such. We didn't have much in common. But that morning I realised that we do, or did. I just wasn't depressed *enough*. Only almost.



Mum and Dad picked me up in the family Camry from a party on the other side of Campbelltown. I was drunk from a stale bottle of red I had stolen from their untouched collection and my mouth was dry from chain smoking all night.

“Thanks for leaving the RSL early for me,” I greeted them. “How are you?”

“Tired,” Dad sighed.

“But at least your mum won fifty bucks on the pokies.”

My tongue was a little loose, as it always was after a few drinks. I was itching for a connection, a real conversation, like the ones I observed my white friends having with their parents. They’re allowed to call their parents by their first name, not that I’d even want to but I liked the idea of it. They were free to say ‘fuck’ in front of them without being hit and got away with calling their mums bitches.

“That’s pretty good.”

“What about you? How was the party?”

“Fine. Boring. I started taking some new medication so maybe that’s impacting my mood,” I tried saying casually.

Mum jolted her head towards the back seat.

“What medication are you on?”

“Um... I’ve decided to start taking antidepressants. But I don’t know about them... I’m just trying it out.”

We turned into the hill that led to our home at the top of the cul de sac. I stared into the home of our mourning neighbours as Dad parked the car.

Silence cut through the air. I immediately wished the words hadn’t left my mouth. I noticed my hand was already on the door handle.

“Since when? Why? What’s going o—”

“It’s nothing,” I interrupted, fixing my mouth into a smile. “The doctor just suggested it. It’s no big deal. I’m fine, you have nothing to be worried about.”

the you as a subject and everything

Duy Quang Mai

see, how our hands became artefacts
and the seasons are still here?

let me tell you a story that I can't seem
to forget.

there was a riverboat left stranded on the pavement near my
house, lying on a narrow alleyway top in Ha Noi.

the plywood boat that looks like a small birth-mark from afar,
with its charred edges and ashen wood—

and nobody ever asked why.

maybe why is a question of the years
being further hammered out,

further tendered. maybe in a life parallel to this,
a couple decided to press their blued bodies together

and dove straight into a still lagoon, making themselves eternal.
and the boat became a souvenir of heartbreaks.

or alternatively,

you can say, maybe, in a life parallel to this, there is a wedding.

a little glass-blown day untouched by extinction—only not yet.
so the newlyweds decided to build a Noah's Ark,

in case one does arrive. but no one does, so the boat stays.

the moral of this story is: the boat was a way out,
a keepsake or memo

of survival.

I don't know why I'm telling you this,
perhaps I am making this up. who knows?

because Orpheus looked back and I did too,
knowing Eros collapses.

and our hands kept flailing
on the balcony in the winter-soft air because we wanted to know

what was it like to be saved by ourselves.

and I always said yes instead of forever. sorry instead of hello.
so *O*, I mumbled.

*O look at the alleyway, how it was a shattered riverbank,
heartless and browning.*

because once upon a time,
there was only time and nothing else.

let's just say that everything is gone,
the marks of four summers in my sentences.

because you were once soft
and the year became a memory. so I made myself stay here.

so I cupped my all inside these palms,
I brought my stillborn heart into the wasteland of abstractions.

and I said *welcome home*,

welcome home.

From *Housewife's Lament*

Yasmin Ali

I do not know where to begin but I know that I cannot cry now.

The scene before me was nothing short of sordid. An unforgivable transgression against God, nature and everything good in the world.

My mother lay submerged in a pool of murky blood. The red ink staining her white *guntiino* and *garbasaar*. Her hands firmly clutching her *tusbax*, so tightly that the beads left prints on her skin.

Her coagulated life essence expelled a pungent stench that hovered over her, guarding her body.

A mute witness.

My mother had finally unleashed her built-up anger by splashing her sacred blood onto every surface, dividing up the belongings. The jewellery box full of trinkets, the framed family photos, the books on the nightstand. Even the crème Aubusson rug now lay soaked.

This was the final stand against the man who tied her to this house and the useless ornaments that never shielded her from his disapproval.

His death didn't free her from his hold. Her mourning period was a testament to that. She despised the people that visited her stating they felt her pain.

To tell the truth, I think she was relieved.

My eyes wandered around the room and calculated fifty-four distinguishable tallies above my parents' wedding picture. That number coincided with the confinement of my mother's existence.

My father's brown almond eyes gleamed with a purpose and a dream. No hint of the brute he would become. His tall structure and confidence commanded every space. The garden backdrop hid in the shadow of his aura. My mother's petite body was engulfed in his hug, her small face poking out from under his tux. Her subtle smile was haunting.

I tore my eyes away when the blood began to drip onto the picture.

There was nowhere to look for nothing was safe. Everything stained. Each drop a sin.

My eyes swept through the disaster that lay before me. It took my mind a good while to put together her suffering. I was in some part the reason my mother had damned her soul for eternity to come.

I implored her to face her ferocious reality, knowing she would never do it herself.

A line she once uttered resurfaced in my mind. “Qof aad dhashay kuma dhalin.” *The one you birthed didn’t birth you.*

She said this all while shaking her head after we’d argued over my refusal to move to Somalia with her.

“*Dhaqancelis* at 24? No thank you.”

“It’s not *dhaqancelis*, I want you to meet your cousins and for you to reconnect with your culture and religion. You can’t stay here forever.”

“Why not? I’ve already had enough with the aunties visiting to make fun of my Somali and you want me to go to the country you deserted? You must be joking. I will stick out like a sore thumb.”

“You are okay with going to Italy and Japan with your complexion but not your own country. Where you have family and a history. I thought I raised you better.”

My mother always knew how to wield guilt like a weapon.



I wasn’t allowed to mourn, I had to cover up her deed. She belonged to a family, a culture, and a religion even though she felt deserted by all those she loved. If people were to see, they would slander and denounce her for her actions. I could already hear their unforgiving taunts and speculations.

“What on Earth is so unbearable that she had to sin against her own self?”

“I knew her, she didn’t appear crazy. Maybe this is the work of a jinn, evil eye or black magic?”

They had a point. Her *dugsi* attendance was perfect until last winter when she abandoned it all together. In the mornings she would play *Adhkar As-Sabah*. Standing over me as I tied my shoes making sure I recited them before leaving. In the evening *Adhkar Al-Massa*.

That too stopped.

“*Jinns* and *Shaytaan* hate the Quran. That’s why we recite it to protect us,” my macalin once told me when he noticed me coming up with excuses to leave *dugsi*.

My back received several strikes from his stick until it bled through my dress. It could be that memories of a teacher doing the same to her in her youth finally caught up to her, or the women gossiping got on her nerves.

I could not make up for my innate selfishness and my smug, inflated sense of my own intelligence. It was too late for that. I had one last opportunity though to give her the peace she craved before the promised torment began, even though I knew God was aware of her afflictions and was ever-forgiving.

With a heavy heart, I started scrubbing away the blood that we shared, now drying on the brown carpet. The blood, however, refused to budge against all forms of force. It was waiting for an acknowledgement from the real sinners. Its rich accusing colour resisted the strong cocktail mixture of detergent. The same way she withstood the storms of hell that plagued her life.

I clawed at the wet tint. The agonising ticking hands of the clock increasing in tempo, accompanying my furious movements.

Time belongs to no-one.

4ever and ever

Ryan Bautista

It's 2015. I'm at the second-hand section of a record store. I scan through the letters cataloguing the CDs and stop at "V". I begin to sift through CDs by artists starting with "V", and pause when I see The Veronicas' debut album—*The Secret Life of...* (2005)—priced at a hot \$7.95. On the cover is a piece of crumpled paper. The top left corner reads "the secret life of...", written in small typewriter font. On the left are black-and-white checks, a visual signifier of 2000s pop-punk music. On the right is an unidentified school logo. And smack bang in the middle are two lipstick stains, with "the veronicas" scrawled over them, coloured in lead pencil.

It's the lipstick stains, I think, that double as a symbol of how Jess and Lisa Origliasso—the twin sisters who record as The Veronicas—have left a mark on my tween years.

I was in Year Four when The Veronicas released the song that kickstarted their career: "4ever". My introduction to them was through ABC's music video program *Rage*. In the video aired by *Rage* on Saturday mornings, they check into a hotel room, taking Polaroids in the elevator, they play pillow fights, then decorate the bathroom mirror with some red lippie. Though most of the video takes place in a hotel room, it makes a link between top 40 music and road trips that double as a point on how their music—particularly this frequently sound-tracked record—should best be consumed. Lisa and Jess drive on the highway, with Jess steering during a chorus that screams for the listener's attention.

My only gripe at the time, however, was *that* wasn't the music video I wanted to see.

The one I wanted to see was the original Australian version of the video, where Lisa and Jess break and enter a pool. I thought this version was the perfect video to introduce The Veronicas to the pop-rock arena. In a 2005 *Sydney Morning Herald* article, Lisa said they were partly named after Veronica Lodge from the *Archie* comics, because "Veronica's basically the dark-haired rich bitch who... gets her own way". Indeed, as The Veronicas, Lisa and Jess get their own way in this video. They seek temporary thrills, from the moment they jump into the pool, with a random guy who helped them break and enter following suit. Lisa and Jess move on to the next thrill, where they play tug-of-war over the same guy, as the bridge plays. *Let's pretend you're mine*. The camera turns to Lisa, pulling the guy's right arm her way. *We can just pretend, we can just pretend / Yeah yeah*. The object of both Lisa's and Jess's desire looks down at his chest, bewildered as he begins to stretch into two. *You got what I like*. The camera moves to Jess, pulling the

guy's left arm her way. *You got what I like.* A cut to a close-up of his face splitting into two. *I got what you like / Oh come on.* The guy has two heads, an expanding chest. *Just one taste and you want more.* Now four arms. *SO TELL ME WHAT YOU'RE WAITING FOR.* Both Lisa and Jess have a clone each. The guitar riff plays, and they ditch the clones for their next thrill. Scene fades in and out to a sk8er boi cruising down the street on his board, with Lisa and Jess on his back. Everyone leaves the pools as the sunrise kicks in.

Watching that music video as a nine-year-old, I was charmed by the idea of what it's like to be a teen, to sneak out at midnight and get up to tomfoolery. More importantly, as Veronicas, the girls never suffered the consequences of breaking and entering a public space. And if they did get caught—like they did in the “Everything I'm Not” vid, where a policeman sees The Veronicas with a car they stole and vandalised—they would run.

Though my favourite music video of “4ever” screamed goals, my teen years were absolute vanilla.



It's 2008. I'm a Year Seven student attending Evans High School. During maths class, I overhear F tell R something along the lines of, “Ryan used to be so gay last year; now he's such a nerd”. R makes no comment.

As a “nerd”, I didn't have the social capital to be invited to outings. Even if I did receive an invite, I would often turn down the offer in favour of hitting the books.

But despite the lack of invites that came my way, the closest I got to living my best “4ever” life was at 19, when my high school friends, E and A and I were on the Richmond-bound train home. It was New Year's Eve, 2014. We pictured ourselves watching the midnight fireworks from the steps of the Sydney Opera House. Instead, after an unsuccessful attempt at making that vision a reality, we were a few stations away from Blacktown when we saw fireworks lit up among the rows of houses. To kickstart 2015, we went running through each tin can, up and down the carriages, yelling “HAPPY NEW YEAR!” to anyone who was still on the train.

I may not have taken a leaf out of The Veronicas' handbook and lived my (teenage) life to the fullest, but there's something about “4ever”—and by extension the work The Veronicas released at the height of their success (2005-2008)—that resonates with me. Revisiting *The Secret Life of...* as a young adult, ten

years since it released, I realise that it still (mostly) holds up. I still get a cathartic release from listening to their songs. Their songs are packed with so much energy; just look at “4ever” which has a BPM (beats-per-minute) of 144. It dawned on me recently that their music is perfectly suited to a music festival setting.

It wasn’t until 2019—the year The Veronicas dominated the festival circuit—that I got to witness the energy “4ever” et al. possessed live. My first Veronicas concert was at Good Things Festival. As I made my way towards the barriers, I found solace in noticing a few festivalgoers wearing Veronicas merch. “I SURVIVED THE WALL OF DEATH 2019”, it said on the back of their shirts. I found a spot at the front, hoping Jess and Lisa would notice me, a visibly Asian person, in the sea of whiteness.

Jess and Lisa approached the stage. “You guys ready to party with us?” Jess asked the crowd. “COME ON MELBOURNE”, she yelled out early in their set. “I MEAN SYDNEY—FUCK!”

For the next forty-five minutes, they played the hits that shared a similar BPM to “4ever”: “Take Me on the Floor” (140 BPM), “Everything I’m Not” (134 BPM), “Hook Me Up” (134 BPM) and “In My Blood” (120 BPM), with a cover of Blink 182’s “I Miss You” thrown in, and a surprise appearance from The Used’s Bert McCracken.

I was fulfilled even before their set ended. I don’t have visual proof on my phone, so as I write this, I look to a video Lisa shared on her Instagram. “Well that was fucking fun”, goes the caption. “Thanks @goodthingsfestival we loved every second ❤️”. In the video, Lisa heads offstage to meet the crowd. *COME ON BABY WE AIN’T GONNA LIVE FOREVER*. Jess joins Lisa offstage. *LET ME SHOW YOU ALL THE THINGS THAT WE COULD DO*. Further from the stage, a crowd of Veronicas stans mosh to the chorus. *YOU KNOW YOU WANNA BE TOGETHER*. Lisa invites the crowd to belt out the lyrics. *AND I WANNA SPEND THE NIGHT WITH YOU / YEAH YEAH*. A security guard pulls a crowd-surfer from the heads of festivalgoers and pushes him aside. *WITH YOU-OU*. Lisa dodges. *YEAH YEAH*. In front of Lisa is a female fan, and they share a moment together: *COME WITH ME TONIGHT / WE CAN MAKE THE NIGHT LAST FOREVER*.

A guy in front of me left to participate in a much-anticipated wall of death. What instigated this was a Facebook event titled “Wall of death when The Veronica’s play Untouched at Good Things” which garnered the interest of 10,000 Facebook users. “Let’s fucking send it for the Veronica’s!” its description said. But what may have also inspired this was a Facebook meme page, “I saw a UFO and nobody believes

meme”, that shared a video in 2017. “Mosh pits just aren’t what they used to be :(”, went the caption. In the video, an unidentified heavy metal singer with a scraggly beard and tattoo sleeves covering both arms instructs his audience, turning to his left side, and growling, “I want you to kill everyone over there”. To his right side, he says, “And I want you to kill everybody over there”. He commands the crowd to hold. The “4ever” guitar riff plays over the video. The chorus hits and a swarm of white metalheads fill the void.

While “4ever” was one of my main reasons for seeing The Veronicas at Good Things Festival, “Untouched” (177 BPM) was the song that gave most festivalgoers a reason to see them live.



“Untouched”, The Veronicas’ magnum opus, made them the first Australian act to sell one million downloads in the US. It was the first Australian track to chart in the top 20 of the US charts since Kylie Minogue’s “Can’t Get You Out of My Head”. Meanwhile, back in Australia, it reached number two on the charts. (ROBBED.)

To this day, a large portion of their fanbase look to The Veronicas as a nostalgia act—just look at the resurgence of “Untouched” via memes in recent years. It moves beyond the idea of “Untouched” as the national anthem and into the idea of “Untouched” as a queer anthem. Though it’s not explicitly queer like the *I wanna kiss a girl / I wanna kiss a boy* breakdown in “Take Me on the Floor”, Twitter users have publicly declared the song contributed to their sexual awakening. A now-deleted viral post by @kooksluv stated, “if u knew the lyrics to untouched by the veronicas at any stage of ur life ur gay now. I don’t make the rules”. Jess even responded to the tweet, adding, “I wrote untouched and now I’m gay”.

At the same time, so much focus on their signature song also meant listeners have measured how good their new songs are based on whether a song’s as good as “Untouched”. Facebook’s Yes/No? is a meme page that required users to simply comment ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Those who stated why they didn’t like the duo, when a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ would have sufficed, gave the reason that their new stuff wasn’t the same as *The Secret Life of...* and *Hook Me Up* eras. One person responded, “Pre-2007 yes; post-2007 no”.

Worse still are those that react “The Veronicas still make music?!” when they never really stopped. It just happened that they took a long break in between their second and third albums.

This was first broken in 2012 by “Lolita”, an electro-dubstep anthem that was meant for the third album, originally scheduled for release later that year. In “Lolita”, Lisa and Jess allude to their fraught relationship with their label Warner Bros. US—the carousel goes around, round, and round—almost prophetically predicting the further two years it would take their third album to be released. After their eponymous third album was finally released in 2014, Lisa said, “We were making all this music but we weren’t allowed to give it to the fans. It was so frustrating, and they were so frustrated at us. They were like, ‘When are we going to see any music from you? Are you on vacation? Are you over it? Are you even doing music anymore?’”

Despite the carousel, Lolita reclaims her power in the second verse: *Wild and exciting / I’m breaking you down / You’re making a comeback / I’m taking your crown*. They left Warner Bros. US in 2013 and inked a deal with Sony Music. Under their current label, they’ve scored three top ten hits, including two number ones with the piano ballad “You Ruin Me” and the 2000s Kylie inspired “In My Blood”.

While their fanbase has either been stuck in the mid-2000s or have dismissed their “post-2007” material because it’s not the same as “Untouched”, they have maintained one thing throughout their career: the lack of filter in their lyrics. “Think of Me” (113 BPM), their first single off the upcoming fourth album *Human*, is proof they’re still their uncensored selves. The narrator leaves a toxic relationship which, many listeners will understand, is a reference to Jess’s relationship with Ruby Rose that ended in 2018. *It’s been five months, nine hours, forty-two seconds since I left home*, goes the pre-chorus. *It’s been five months, nine hours, forty-two seconds since I felt whole*. Some listeners have been disappointed by the sad slowness of the song. One anonymous reviewer on iTunes wrote:

It is not the Veronicas that we used to know. They have grown up, experienced a lot of heartaches. Their music is getting a bit sad vibe in it and not so much of the rock pop, carefree kind of spirit anymore.

It is a catchy song, a bit haunting. Did not like this one particular word in the lyrics, felt it ruined the whole picture a bit.

Still give it a 5 star rating, as I m a fan of the Veronicas.

This one particular word the reviewer refers to is: *Do you miss me in your sheets? / Do you miss me in your bed? / The way we talk all night / The way I give you head*. Still, hearing the song on commercial radio, despite gatekeepers censoring that last word, is significant for the song’s depiction of queer relationships via Jess-as-narrator’s point-of-view. As Jess tweeted after a conversation with one user, “So my conclusion is we need to talk about and sing about queer sex more often so we can teach the straights what ‘real’ sex is. 🤪 End. (Lol).”



After their forty-five minute Good Things set was done, The Veronicas headed backstage. Most of the crowd shuffled to the left to see Australian act Skeggs begin their set. I stayed at the barriers for a tad longer, thinking about how, despite being given an early time slot, they had made their mark on the festival, and on me.

Just like their lipstick-stained album cover.

Roots of Revani

Tina Nyfakos

I'd been avoiding it for weeks.

I said I'd go when she had days left, but I couldn't stomach the thought of seeing her deteriorate before me. Her sunken eyes, her withered body, her jaundiced skin. It wasn't even the illness that made her look horrible, but the elixir that was prolonging her life, that ravaged her insides and disfigured her outsides. I didn't want to remember her as small and fragile, the submissive housewife she had been all my life. It was too easy a box to put your grandmother in. She was one, of course, but she was also the matriarch. Nothing happened without her approval, but she allowed my pappou to be the breadwinner and granted him the appearance of being head of the household.

She didn't drive, that was a designated male activity, and she was famous for her desserts. Over the years she'd perfected her Revani. Cooking was feminine, until there was monetary gain to be made. The frivolity of spending the money, however, remained feminine.

"Amelia, *agapi*, women are passengers," she'd tell me as I was driving her to the doctor's appointment she'd all but demanded me to take her to.

"Really? Then what am I?" I'd ask, rolling my eyes.

She was the only one able to say something so outdated and not cop an earful off me. Not even my pappoudees were allowed that luxury. They had chubbier cheeks and more leisure time to spend with me, but they were still men. I was the love child of Simone de Beauvoir and Rosa Luxemburg, but my grandparents lived through World War II, so we'd argue only to reach an impasse that would conclude every single time in mass consumptions of food.

She'd smile, and look at me with adoration.

"*Glykaki*, you're a girl. The baby," she explained.

I couldn't help it; I cracked a smile. It was impossible to have the feminist discussions I longed to have with her. Mainly because of the language barrier, but also, the older people get, the more comfortable they get with their station in life. Or maybe it was resignation. I feared that kind of comfort. I feared many things.

“But yiayia, I’m 29.”

“Yes, still a girl. Get married and then you’ll be a woman.”

“And then I have to stop driving?”

She sighed.

“*Nai agapi*. Men need to feel in control, we tell them where to go, but then we let them take us there.”

She proceeded to flip down the sun visor, and pulled out a golden lipstick bullet. She had two lipsticks. Fuschia pink for weddings and christenings, a rosy pink—barely noticeable—for everything else. Twisting the bullet, she smeared some on. It was a Wednesday and she had just gotten her hair done, cut and coloured, jet black. Her perfume was so strong it was suffocating, but expensive. She smacked her lips together in the mirror and glanced over at me as I neared her doctor’s office, her eyes sparkling.

That’s how I wanted to remember her.



It was okay to be selfish, I told myself. Selfishness was a symptom of living, and I was alive. I wasn’t dying like she was. When you were too sick to be selfish, the only thing that separated you from the dead was a heartbeat. Not the kind of selfish that saw you deprive and demean others in order to get ahead, no, but the kind of selfish where you put your existential needs first. One kind was born from the intrinsic nature of what it meant to be human. It was part of our wiring. The other kind was learned; desires formed from the uncertainty of the external world, that revealed the ugliness we were capable of creating, and manipulated others into replicating.

Yiayia no longer had the certainty of days in her. They spoke about her in moments. Any moment, they’d tell me, like it was a warehouse closing down sale. Get in quick before you miss your chance! So, I got in my car, unmarried as ever, and drove to the hospital. I was a sucker for a sale.

Mum met me at the entrance. She’d texted me a crudely drawn map of the labyrinth-like layout of the hospital she’d used the first couple of days, overestimating my spatial awareness. It was easier for her to come down than explain it to me. Had Mum not been exhausted with the constant surveillance of yiayia, she would’ve been angrier with me, but I think she was just tired. I knew everyone had been talking.

“*Pou einai* Amelia?”

“Her only granddaughter and she hasn’t visited?”

“Despina’s asking for Amelia, where is she?”

We turned left and right so many times I had to pause for a moment to stop my head from spinning. I knew we were close when we approached a lift that led to palliative care. Mum and I got in the lift with one other person in it, a patient. She was in her 20s or 50s, you couldn't tell with sick people. Death was ageless. When it wasn't sudden, when the body was attacking itself, when death caressed its captive before dealing the final blow, there was no appropriate number. She clung onto her IV drip on wheels. When she coughed, I recoiled into the crook of Mum's neck, like a clingy child on their first day of school.

The elevator dinged and I followed Mum. She turned a corner and walked into room 21. It housed six beds. I knew the kind of death that required palliative care wasn't contagious or anything but I wondered if having only a curtain separating each of the terminally ill accelerated their demise. Maybe that was the point. Mum walked to one of the beds nearest the windows, furthest from me. She looked over her shoulder. I was still standing by the entrance.

I gestured for her to come back to me.

"What do I say?"

"What do you mean?"

"When I get in there, like do I have to say anything?"

"Say *hello yiayia*, it's *Amelia*. And yes, she can hear you. She has cancer, she's not deaf."

"Is she talking?"

"On and off. She's said a couple of words today, the most she has in days."

"Oh okay."

"Are you ready?"

"No."

"Amelia, it's fine. She looks sick. I'm not going to lie, but it'll be good for you."

I nodded and followed her in.



There were three uncles, four aunties, and my three littlest cousins, sitting on the floor playing on their tablets, crowded into a room that was meant to hold two, maybe four guests maximum. Try telling old wogs they weren't allowed to visit.

Everyone stared as my mother pushed me through the hoard and forcibly sat me next to my grandmother on her hospital bed. The pressure of silence made my ears hurt.

After three false starts, I got some words out.

“Hi yiayia. How are you?” I asked. “Oh, it’s Amelia.”

As much as I tried not looking at her, I couldn’t avoid it. Glazing over, I unfocused my eyes on purpose, so as not to see her in 20/20. No amount of blurring could obscure the unnatural colour of her skin. Her normally plump body had wasted away. The excess skin aged her. Her immaculate black curls had been streaked white and the colour of her lips bled into her face. She groaned, long and deep, in response to my greeting. Her hand moved slowly to clasp my own.

She didn’t only look like a stranger, she felt like one.

I wanted to get off the bed and sit on the floor with the kids and play on their tablet.

I should have been able to handle this, or at least fake it well enough. Maybe yiayia was right. Maybe I was just a girl after all.

Her fingers stroked my palm as she held on with a whisper of a grip. They had become so bony she could no longer wear her wedding ring. It kept falling off, so they strung it on a gold chain that she now wore tucked into her hospital gown.

I wasn’t going to miss her, not like this. Science proclaimed death as the absence of a pulse. For me, it happened slowly. Pieces of a person began to wither away with them. Then all at once, you were sitting in a room in the oncology ward staring back at someone you were supposed to know, supposed to love, but you felt nothing. Then you felt the shame, the guilt for lack of caring, and they just lay there oblivious to it all, proving the point you never intended to make. It was selfish. But it was okay, because you were living and living people were selfish.

After the long guttural moan, I heard a garbled word that pricked my ears.

“*Marouli*,” she groaned her nickname for me. *Lettuce*.

“*Nai*,” I replied, feeling closer to her than I had in months.

She groaned. No words. I jumped at a hand on my shoulder. I turned around. It was Mum. And an empty room. Sensing the confusion on my face, she explained.

“Dimi and Jeff had to go because it’s getting late, and the kids were getting antsy. Thio Nick had to go take his insulin and him and Thia Marina were driven here by Evie and Manuel. Listen, I’m busting for the toilet. Are you going to be okay on your own?”

I nodded.

“I think it might actually be less awkward if it’s just me in here. Won’t feel so self-conscious having a one-sided conversation.”

“If you’re okay with it then, I might pop down to the cafeteria and get something to eat after the toilet.”

“Do what you need to do.”

Mum smiled.

“I’m so glad you came. Better late than never.”



When Mum left I went back to my grandmother’s bedside, this time sitting in a chair next to her.

“Yiayia, it’s *Maroulaki*.” I sounded like my five-year-old cousin.

“*Marouli*,” she rasped. It hurt to listen to her.

Yiayia had been sick for a couple years now, but still able to live at home and take care of herself mostly.

It was only in the last few months that she’d gotten this bad.

Listen Amelia, I said to myself, you’re here alone with yiayia. Now is your chance. Tell her that you love her, that you’re going to miss her, don’t just sit there saying hello until it’s time to say goodbye.

And then it hit me.

Almost a year had passed since I’d had my yiayia’s Revani. She used to make it at least once a month for me. On top of that, every birthday, Christmas, Easter, my name day, her name day, she made the best Revani from the Aegean to Australia. It was a fact. Everyone requested she make it for every event. I made her a ribbon for it and everything. Say what you will about food, but in my family, it was love. That cake was like being smothered in kisses and suffocated in hugs.

It had been so long since I’d eaten it. No one else knew how to make it, because she made it for everyone. She had her recipe committed to memory and kept it a secret. When her health began declining, I made a mental note to ask her for the recipe before she got too sick. I was going to go over for dinner and ask then. That was the day Mum called me at 4:30 in the afternoon, saying she’d been taken to hospital by the ambulance, and that she’d update me once she knew more. Yiayia hadn’t left the walls of the hospital since.

I took out my phone and went into my voice recording app.

“Yiayia, *einai Marouli*,” I started. “This is important.”

She groaned. No words.

“To Revani,” I said.

“Revani,” she whispered.

“*Nai*,” I shrieked.

“Revani,” she grunted.

“Yes!”

This time there was no grunt. No noise. Silence.

Then, she inhaled enough air for three breaths, and whispered something.

“What? *Ti*?”

“*Óchi*,” she repeated, her voice cracking halfway through. *No*.

“What?”

And then, nothing.

This was supposed to be a horror-stricken moment, full of melancholy and despair, but it wasn’t. In fact, it was the opposite. I felt only pride. She lay there, unmoving as I replayed the voice note back to myself, making sure I hadn’t hallucinated it. It was the only heirloom I’d ever wanted from her. I chuckled in disbelief. I would have felt shame, but I remembered a lesson my yiayia had taught me. To live a life worthy of living was a selfish act. It was also desperately human. Be selfish, she’d tell me. Be human.

One of my thias once begged my yiayia for the recipe. She refused, not even in a polite manner. Just a blunt “no”. Then another aunty asked her how she was going to keep the recipe in the family if she wouldn’t share the ingredients.

“My recipe is not a gift. It’ll go wherever I go,” she said. “*Endaxi*?”

On her deathbed, she used her last breath to protect what was hers. I smiled to myself.

Maybe she really was going to live forever.

Fumbling through my handbag, I fished out a lipstick bullet. The casing was black and silver plastic but it would do. I smudged some bright pink lipstick on her translucent lips. It wasn’t a wedding or a christening. It was a Wednesday—but I didn’t think she’d mind.

